

THE **BUSAN** **DAILY** No.2 **Hollywood** **REPORTER**

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Busan Welcomes Two Icons of Korean Cinema

Screen star Ahn Sung-ki and director Im Kwon-taek arrive at BIFF to announce their latest project — the duo's seventh collaboration and the celebrated helmer's 102nd film

THE *Hollywood* REPORTER

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BUSAN
WEATHER
AND HIGH
TEMPS

TODAY
78° F
26° C



TOMORROW
78° F
26° C



BIFF Lineup Focuses On Discoveries

By Clifford Coonan

The choice of *Vara: A Blessing* by Bhutanese filmmaker and monk Khyentse Norbu to open the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) highlights the growing importance of the Asian market, and Busan's bid to confirm itself as the prime platform for films from the region.

Festival programmers say *Vara: A Blessing*, which was screened at the gala opening on Thursday, reflects the identity of BIFF, which aims to discover new Asian directors and promote the diversity of Asian cinema.

"Our focus is hunting for,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Im Kwon-taek Embarks on His 102nd Film

By Lee Hyo-won

Veteran filmmaker Im Kwon-taek will be adapting the Kim Hoon novel *Hwajang* as his 102nd film.

"I've always been a huge fan of Kim Hoon, and it's going to be a challenge to translate the power and dynamism of his words into an audiovisual medium. It will involve different storytelling techniques from my previous work," Im announced at a press event

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WORLD PREMIERE



Tukubayeva helps her friend through a difficult pregnancy.

Nagima

Kazakh director Zhanna Issabayeva delivers a stark, heartbreaking critique of her country's ambivalence towards its own disenfranchised youth BY CLARENCE TSUI

Boasting a largely expressionless protagonist, an extremely austere mise-en-scene and an overwhelmingly fatalistic view on life, director Zhanna Issabayeva's *Nagima* sees the Kazakh director diving head-on into a stark exploration of social alienation among the have nots in her country. The sporadic flashes of optimism in her previous films about the underclass — the con man who doubles as a good husband and son in *Karoy*, an impoverished boy struggling to take care of his broken family in *Talgat* — are nowhere to be seen. What's left, as Issabayeva deftly reveals, is a world completely drained of color and emotions.

It's perhaps surprising that the Kazakh director's most static and formalistically challenging offering

has been chosen as a splashy gala presentation at the Busan International Film Festival. This is not to say it doesn't deserve the attention: *Nagima* is a showcase for an artist in firm control of her own distinct cinematic aesthetic, no matter how austere it may be.

The film's first quarter sets *Nagima*'s gloom well: the title character, an 18-year-old orphan (played by Dina Tukubayeva), is seen scrubbing dishes in the kitchen, packing leftovers for dinner, travelling on a bus to her home in the outskirts, and interacting with everyone with the same, expressionless demeanor. Bar her brief panic as she calls for help when her pregnant roommate (and fellow orphanage graduate) Anyan (Mariya Nezhentseva) suffers

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BIFF raised eyebrows with the choice to open the fest with the Bhutanese drama *Vara: A Blessing*.

Discoveries

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and introducing works by, new filmmakers, works from countries with obscure film industries, as well as works by experienced yet not very well known filmmakers. It's all about representing the diversity of Asian cinema," says festival director **Lee Yong-kwan**.

The festival features 301 movies from 70 countries around the world, including Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan and

Singapore, with 95 films having world premieres. Also, 94 of the films are feature debuts or second films by new Asian directors.

The New Currents competition at the festival gives two prizes of \$30,000 for first- or second-time Asian directors from a shortlist of 12 productions.

The festival features South Korean director **Kim Ki-duk**'s ultraviolent *Moebius*, as well as **Bong Joon-ho**'s English language sci-fi thriller *Snowpiercer*, starring **Chris Evans**

and **Tilda Swinton**.

From Kazakhstan comes **Alexey Gorlov**'s *The Story of an Old Woman*, from Philippines comes **Hannah Espia**'s *Transit*, **Byamba Sakhya**'s *Remote Control* and from Thailand the festival features *The Isthmus* by **Sopawan Boonnittra** and **Peerachai Kerdshint**.

Asian box office takings are growing at an increasingly rapid rate.

Receipts from the Asia-Pacific region grew by 15 percent to \$10.4 billion in 2012, according to data from the Motion Picture Association, compared to six percent growth in North America to \$10.8 billion in the same period.

Five of the world's top 10 box office markets are now in the Asia-Pacific region. The increase is driven by China, the world's second biggest film market, which notched up \$1.8 billion in box office last year, up 36 percent year-on-year, and it is set to become the world's biggest market by the end of the decade. **THR**

Im Kwon-taek

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

on Friday in Busan. "I'm going to have to find my own voice while exploring Kim's artistic intentions."

Hwajang is about a middle-aged man caring for his dying wife while fantasizing about a younger woman. "My book is really about things that are unsaid and not directly shown, and I am curious to see how Im will portray this onscreen," said Kim.

The project reunites Im with veteran actor **Ahn Sung-ki** for their seventh collaboration. "The master filmmaker will join hands with a great actor to adapt an honored novelist's work — this project is bound to be a masterpiece," said the festival's founder/honorary director **Kim Dong-ho**.

The Myung Films production will go into production in December. Meanwhile, 10 other book-turned-film projects are seeking financial partners at the Asian Film Market on Oct. 8 and 9. **THR**

Creative Freedoms Driving Vietnamese Cinema Renaissance

By Patrick Brzeski

Much the way Vietnam has modeled its embrace of global capitalism on the example set by China, the country's gradual liberalization of its media and entertainment sectors have also been pursued along lines similar to its fellow nominally communist neighbor. The Vietnamese government's New Cinema Law, which made it possible for private film production and distribution companies to operate legally and independently for the first time in decades, only came into effect in 2002. Previously, most films were funded by the government and produced through state studios; chances



IN FOCUS: VIETNAM

were anyone working in the industry was a state employee.

"When the law changed, people in the industry were worried about the future," says **Van Ha**, a producer and director at Red Bridge TV & Production Services in Hanoi. "But ... more films are being made now than in the past, and the budgets are much bigger."

Thanks to a steady re-expansion of cinema chains, after a collapse in the 1980s, box office has been on the rise — from \$12.2 million in 2009 to \$55

million in 2012.

Showing in Busan this year is *Once Upon a Time in Vietnam*, a fantasy martial arts film shot in the style of a classic Western. With a \$2 million budget, its producers say it's the most expensive film ever made by the Vietnamese industry. The film's director and star **Dustin Nguyen** is a Vietnamese American who returned to Vietnam five years ago after a 30-year career in Hollywood.

Nguyen says he returned to Vietnam because of the creative freedom he discovered when first working there. "People sometimes look at me like I'm crazy when I say that — because it's a communist country," he says, laughing. "But there's really no studio system here, so if you can find financing and you're willing to work with the censors, you can make any film you want and it's a free and flexible process." **THR**

REVIEWS



Tukubayeva attempts to find her birth mother.

Nagima

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

bleeding contractions, Nagima returns to blank-faced mode as she and her voluble prostitute neighbor Nina (Galina Pyanova) accompany Anya to the hospital.

As Anya dies after giving birth, Nagima is jolted, albeit

just slightly, from her impassivity, as she seeks out her biological mother. But that reunion ends sourly: her mother demands to know why Nagima wants to “ruin her life a second time” by coming to her farm and then urges her to look up her own medical records in order to understand the bizarre randomness of life.

While the pessimism doesn’t offer that much comfort for the viewer, Issabayeva has made *Nagima* artistically coherent with the static camerawork from Sayat Zhangazinov.

Devoid of histrionics or excessive exposition, the film offers a sharp and sober contemplation about life, with the fleeting appearance of oppressors (such as the medical staff who at first refuse to treat Anya because of her lack of identification documents, or the employers and landlords exploiting the young women) just enough to provide a backdrop for the struggle of these extremely disfranchised (undereducated, kinless women) characters.

So it is that *Nagima* comes with its longueurs, but it still offers a captivating, bravely claustrophobic look at young lives going nowhere.

Gala Presentation

Cast Dina Tukubayeva, Galina Pyanova, Mariya Nezhentseva

Director Zhanna Issabayeva // 80 minutes

Drift

A vaguely unstructured exercise in visual storytelling anchored by a strong central performance

BY ELIZABETH KERR

The modern ruins of post-communist Romania form the backdrop for a man’s quest for redemption and, possibly, punishment following his wife’s death after a long illness in Benny Vandendriessche’s *Drift*, an esoteric and somewhat opaque meditation on loss and grief.

Beginning with typically Scandinavian aesthetic defined by a dour, snowy palette — despite being a Dutch/Belgian co-production — the film jumps back and forth through time as we learn what takes The Drifter (Dirk Hendriks) from seemingly contented Everyman to transient loner on the verge of madness.

The films begins with the man literally drifting at sea and is followed by a history of how the stray dogs that populate Romania got there. The animals then serve as the backbone of an

extended metaphor likening The Drifter’s increasingly untethered, roaming existence as he is slowly coming to grips with the loss of his partner with the marginalized dogs that become his only companions.

The disjointed, almost picaresque narrative comes together slowly and silently as the true nature of The Wife’s (Lieve Meeussen) death becomes clear.

Though the wife remains a mystery, Vandendriessche does a superb job of realizing a comfortable, healthy relationship between the two, making his grief palpable.

Hendriks and Meeussen have a playful, comfortable dynamic that makes their devotion to each other clear in just a few scenes. That’s unsurprising given the majority of *Drift* is told through its visuals and the sometimes vivid and evocative photography by Carl Rottiers, with Hendriks’s committed performance frequently coming to the rescue when the film borders on hysterical.

Even at a brief 80-odd minutes, *Drift* boasts an awful lot of filler, as sequences drag on and on, giving rise to the idea it would be a better medium-



Hendriks’s only companions are stray dogs.

length film than feature. Nonetheless Vandendriessche — who is an accomplished commercial and music video director in his native Belgium — has a sharp eye for image and an appreciation for unconventional composition and use of off-screen space that ultimately helps make The Drifter’s headspace believably scattered and flirting with utter disintegration — if not wholly relatable.

Flashforward

Cast Dirk Hendriks, Lieve Meeussen, Constantin Cojocar

Director Benny Vandendriessche
No rating, 83 minutes



Han plays a rookie cop tracking a sophisticated crime ring.

Cold Eyes

A state-of-the-art Korean cop thriller plays a tight, exciting game with genre rules and high tech

BY DEBORAH YOUNG

What's not to like in this mile-a-minute remake of the 2007 Hong Kong thriller *Eye in the Sky*, in which a crack police team challenges a brilliant, invincible criminal mastermind? It may be the oldest cop plot in the world, but the sheer display of technique on screen transmutes the familiar lump of coal to gold. With filmmaking this good and tech work this innovative, the only question is when Asian genre films this entertaining are going to take over the rest of the world.

The pre-title sequence is a complete story in itself, a cops-and-robbers stakeout on the subway and streets that forces the viewer to decide who's shadowing who. It offers a fast intro to the main characters: police chief Hwang (Sol Kyung-gu) and his team, a pretty, tom-boyish young rookie whose code name is Piglet (Han Hyo-joo), the happy young cop Squirrel (Lee Jun-ho) and the smooth jacket-and-tie criminal James (Jung Woo-sung) who happens to be passing by.

The cops are witty and deadpan, naming a suspect "Thirsty Hippo" the minute their equipment pinpoints his oversize figure off a surveillance camera. Even without backstories, they show a human side, as when Piglet disobeys the rules to prevent a double murder she happens across. Hwang and Lee are disapproving but perhaps secretly they agree with her. The whole cast is disciplined and extremely good in getting just enough character across to grab sympathy without cluttering up the plot.

Open Cinema

Cast Sol Kyung-gu, Han Hyo-joo, Jung Woo-sung

Directors Cho Ui-seok, Kim Byung-seo

No rating, 118 min.

Cho Ui-seok and Kim Byung-seo

The co-directors of local blockbuster *Cold Eyes* discuss putting a Korean spin on Hong Kong icon Johnny To's *Eye in the Sky* By Lee Hyo-won

Why did you decide to do a remake of the Hong Kong film?

Kim: I saw *Eye in the Sky* by chance at a local film festival and thoroughly enjoyed it. I kept the remake idea to myself but then decided to share it with [Cho Ui-seok], who happened to be preparing a film about surveillance. So we decided to do something together.

How did you want the remake to compare/contrast with the original?

Cho: It was relatively easy to develop the scenario. We kept the essence of the original story, but added more layers to the narrative and gave more depth to the characters. More importantly we wanted to capture the unique characteristics of Seoul, and I think it would be amusing for viewers to do a scene-by-scene comparison between the two films.

Kim: The original film expresses Hong Kong very well, and so we wanted the city of Seoul to have a strong screen presence like a character of its own. The film introduces Seoul's iconic symbols to those unfamiliar with the city, from Cheonggye Stream to traditional markets and business districts, but we also wanted to present these recognizable, everyday places in a new yet believable way for Koreans.

Cho: The overall scale of the production has also grown. In the original, the crime ring leader watches over the city on top of a four-story building, but James [the villain in *Cold Eyes*] stands on top of a skyscraper. We also paid a lot of attention



Kim, left, and Cho on the set

to details. James is a very well-dressed, classy villain, and so he wears a vintage watch and uses a fountain pen rather than a pencil like the character in *Eye in the Sky*. We were inspired by a lot of other things, too, such as *C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation*, and wanted to create a fast-paced, clean-cut crime thriller.

The film plays with the idea of surveillance and perspective.

How did you express this?

Cho: We wanted to explore this idea of surveillance being used both for crime and against crime. We tried to intensify the tension between characters and scenes. We kept things at an eye-to-eye level if that makes sense.

Kim: The idea of perspective is very important, and so there are a lot of scene changes showing different characters' points of view. I used a steady camera most of the time for chase scenes that involved walking rather than running. But I also opted for some handheld camerawork, which turns up the emotional engagement of the sequences. This was also important for keeping the suspense throughout the film, because there weren't as many action scenes. **THR**

Once Upon a Time in Vietnam

Actor Dustin Nguyen makes a promising feature debut with a fun — if derivative — martial arts epic

BY ELIZABETH KERR

Perhaps still best known for his role as one of the teen narcs on Fox's 1987 series *21 Jump Street*, actor Dustin Nguyen makes his feature directorial debut with *Once Upon a Time in Vietnam*, a fantastical martial epic with a touch of Hollywood polish. Replete with all the splintering wood, flying kicks to the face, screeching sword-play and brotherly and/or romantic betrayal of a good Tsui Hark film, Nguyen's actioner is a film designed to shake the idea that Vietnamese cinema is all *Cyclo* and *Bi, Don't Be Afraid*.

Master Bao (Nguyen) comes from an army of warrior monks dedicated to protecting the country from its enemies. Unable to return to monastic life after witnessing all manner of death and destruction, he now spends

his days wandering the land looking for deserters. His journey takes him to a village where local thugs are harassing a humble baker, Hien (Thai Hoa Tran), who won't sell his shop. He rents a room with Hien, and before you can say "deep dark secret" we discover Bao has a history with Hien's wife, Anh (Thanh Van Ngo). The short version is that Anh's more badass than a housewife has a right to be, and Bao cleans up the town before taking off again.

OUATIV draws from *Yojimbo*, classic American westerns (there's a showdown at high noon), Hong Kong action and heaps of other genre films and mashes everything in a timeless cocktail that revels in its silliness and anachronisms. Harley Davidsons and pick-



Nguyen, right, beats down another bad guy.

up trucks ride along horses and carriages, soldiers refer to their emperor, the baker's specialty is croissants and Bao's preference is for Johnnie Walker. Despite Nguyen ensuring that as director he looks heroic (and perfectly tressed) at every turn as star, it's Roger Yuan (who's had small parts in *Skyfall* and *Bulletproof Monk* among others) that makes the biggest impression in just a few

minutes as a former general fond of executing deserters. Ngo also deserves praise for giving Anh some real backbone — not to mention looking awesome decked out in her leather fighting gear and wielding a sword.

A Window on Asian Cinema
Cast Dustin Tri Nguyen, Thanh Van Ngo, Thai Hoa Tran // **Director** Dustin Tri Nguyen // 106 minutes

Again

Japanese filmmaker Kanai Junichi offers up a sensitive but misguided teen drama

BY ELIZABETH KERR

Writer-director Kanai Junichi wades into some tricky but (initially) refreshing territory in his feature debut *Again*, a quasi-coming-of-age story that also tackles sexual assault and takes the victim's side. Despite occasionally gratuitous hand held camera work and some aural dead zones, Kanai crafts a compelling, if simple, narrative that dares to suggest a teen rape victim is not at fault and also that the resulting emotions can be conflicted and confusing. Young star Yoshikura Aoi deserves a great deal of credit for the film's more sensitive and affecting moments, and it's not because of her that *Again* collapses in its last act.

High school student Hatsumi (Yo-

shikura) is something of a shrinking violet. Shy, unassuming and completely under her strict lawyer mother's (Asaka Mayumi) control, she's doing her best to adjust to life in the small town they relocated to following her father's death. One thing she does fully invest herself in is running. Things seem to take a turn personally when she meets Ryutaro (Yagira Yuya), an equally



Yoshikura, left, and Yuya become fast friends.

alienated garbage collector. They bond over their empathy of loss and he makes her feel at home in the town. Hatsumi thinks she's found a soul mate, but that belief evaporates when he rapes her.

Though frequently heavy handed — Kanai revels in rote images of isolation — Yoshikura keeps Hatsumi understandable. But what begins as a reasonably compelling and unusually sympathetic examination of the aftermath of sexual assault devolves into a misguided tragic romance in a demonstration of victim blaming and a fundamental misunderstanding of the crime. As soon as Ryutaro begins his court-mandated "reflection" upon his act, *Again* goes off the rails. The final meeting between the two spirals into romantic melodrama before an inappropriately happy ending.

New Currents

Cast Yoshikura Aoi, Yagira Yuya

Director Kanai Junichi // 106 minutes



Kahn finds romance in a truly unexpected place.

The Lunchbox

A smart, unpretentious first feature that offers a delicate trip through human relations in teeming Mumbai BY DEBORAH YOUNG

The Lunchbox is a charming first feature that describes denizens of the sprawling Mumbai metropolis in a tender, ingenious tale of romance by correspondence. Instead of using modern social media, the virtual couple meets through a lunchbox mix-up that could only happen in India. What is most endearing is the delicacy with which writer-director Ritesh Batra reveals the hopes, sorrows, regrets and fears of everyday people without any sign of condescension or narrative trickery.

At the heart of the film is the incredible system of “dabbawallahs,” a community of lunchbox delivery men who deliver thousands of hot meals cooked by housewives every morning and deposited on their husbands’ office desks. Ila (Nimrat Kaur) is a pretty housefrau who is trying to win the attention of her extraordinarily distracted husband (Nakul Vaid) through his stomach. Her lunchbox is delivered to the wrong desk one day; the surprised beneficiary is a lonely accountant on the verge of retirement, Saajan (Irrfan Kahn). Realizing the mistake that has occurred, Ila encloses a note the next day in which she impulsively reveals some of her frustrations to the perfect stranger. He writes back and, day after day, in handwritten notes that always maintain a dignified tone, they become intimates in a sort of non-literary *84 Charing Cross Road* correspondence.

The film is a very Indian tale in its delicacy and humor — especially in the way it sweeps its characters up in a vast social grid that includes over-crowded trains and traffic jams. Long before the end, you are rooting for everybody to find his or her slice of happiness and to reach the right station, even if someone takes the wrong train.

A Window on Asian Cinema
Cast Irrfan Khan, Nimrat Kaur
Director Ritesh Batra
 104 minutes.

Story of an Old Woman

Alexey Gorlov’s single-shot familial drama boasts a powerful lead performance but is undermined by an emphasis on melodrama BY CLARENCE TSUI

In most circumstances, single-shot feature-length films are always meant to have the director as its star: established auteurs have seen their pedigree heightened further (as with Alexander Sokurov for *Russian Ark*) and young filmmakers have been propelled to fame with their efforts (as in the case of Uruguay’s Gustavo Hernandez after *The Silent House*). Kazakhstan’s Alexey Gorlov would certainly have wanted the same with his single-take sophomore effort *Story of an Old Woman*, but the Steadicam-backed effort has turned out to be more a celebration of the 81-year-old lead actress who, throughout the film, barely moves.

And this is not just because Liya Nelskaya, a national treasure in the Central Asian country, passed away in March before the film was completed. While appearing on screen largely confined to a wheelchair and with her acting restricted to movements of the eyes and also very slight facial contortions, her (literally) understated performance offers more of an emotional engagement than Gorlov’s perennially swerving cameras, soap opera-esque screenplay and excessively sweeping score.

In what is to be her final film, Nelskaya plays Anna, a paralyzed pensioner whose family is trying to accommodate after she moves back to the lush mansion she used to live in before being relocated to an elderly



Nelskaya, left, died before the film was complete.

home. As the film unfolds, the motives of this sudden surge of familial love are gradually revealed: Anna’s children are now welcoming her back because her presence is deemed essential for a financial windfall brought about by a good deed she might have done during the second world war.

But the gradual unraveling relationships among the members of the clan are driven mostly by melodramatic clichés — bickering couples, alcoholic cousins and narcissistic youngsters — and, in fact, it’s easy to question why *Story’s* narrative is appropriate for a one-take treatment. Perhaps it’s because of this that Gorlov opted to have all buttons pushed to whip emotions up. But the master actress has probably taught him a last lesson — that sometimes less is more.

New Currents
Cast Liya Nelskaya, Eugeniy Zhumanov, Oksana Boychenko, Polina Frolova
Director Alexey Gorlov
 75 minutes

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